

## **MEDICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS IN SOUTH ASIA**

*Proliferation of small arms is becoming a worldwide nuisance and it has become a problem particularly for the south Asia where conflicts are present in almost all the countries. Conflicts are within the countries and in some cases with each other and problem of terrorism is adding fuel to the fire. In our neighborhood involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh this problem is raising its head in a very ugly manner. Small arms are Pistols, Revolvers, Hunting rifles, Machine guns and Light weapons that can be carried by one or two people mounted on a vehicle or carried by pack animal like Shoulder fired rocket Launchers and Mortars (of Caliber less than 100 mm). This is a very big problem and magnitude of this problem can be gauged from the following facts that as per the small arms survey: 2003 there are 639 Millions small arms and light weapons in circulation which are more than one for every 10 people on this planet. This has a severe impact on human development, including death and injury, the collapse of basic services, declines in economic activity. More than four million small arms have been eliminated from global stockpile in the last decade due to weapons collection programs.*

*8 millions such arms are manufactured each year. 13 countries dominate this trade amongst these USA, Russia and China dominates. It is a trade of US \$ 4 – 5 Billions. 80% of such weapons are purchased by civilians. 59.2% of such weapons are owned privately, 37.8% owned by government armed forces, 2.8% owned by Police and 0.2 % owned by insurgents.*

*If we compare this problem with USA there are 220 – 230 millions weapons which cause 2800 deaths every year with highest rate of suicides, homicides and accidents and it is a leading cause of death in age group 15 -24 years and third leading cause of death in under 15 year age group.*

*If we see the magnitude of problem in UN after imagining United Nation as a country then we will see that there are 17 – 25 deaths / 100,000 due to this problem, 100 relief workers die every year, 280 relief workers injured every year and 2 millions small arms destroyed every year. During the period of 1991-2000 in 46 out of 49 conflicts these were weapons of choice causing 300,000 deaths out of which 90% were civilians and 80% killed were women and children. When children are exposed to guns it instill a belief that weapons are essential instruments for protection and survival and ultimately this will lead to gun dependency, gun glorification and culture of violence, fear & hopelessness.*

*Magnitude of problem in India is by no means a small one. In past 10 years there have been 75,000 deaths by such weapons and 4500 illicit arms have been seized. Most of the country made arms are made in U.P. and Bihar and foreign made weapons are smuggled through Bombay via air and sea routes. There are 5 millions such arms with terrorists, insurgents and criminals (About 1% of total weapons). 25% trade is illegal (one and a half billion US \$). Prime Minister India Gandhi was killed by small arms, terrorism shattered Punjab, there is burning problem in north east India, Kashmir is Bleeding, People War Group and other smaller groups are causing havoc in India with these weapons.*

*Sri Lanka is facing its own problems. LTTE (Tamil) had ethnic tensions with the majority Sinhalese population with huge casualties on both sides. Small arms & light weapons are mainly used by them.*

*Magnitude of problem in Nepal is though not big but cannot be ignored. There is Constitutional Monarchy and multi party democracy in this country. King Birendra and members of the Royal family of Nepal were killed. There is Maoist Group insurgency activities resulting in killing many civilians.*

*Bangladesh got separated from Pakistan in 1971. Its First Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was killed and there are Human rights violations on some ethnic groups, women and children.*

*In Bhutan there is hereditary monarchy and it got independent in 1950. it is facing problem of refugees emigrating to Nepal but still it has US \$ 1467 per capita GDP.*

*Afghanistan was invaded in 1979 by Soviets union and which were displaced by mujahiddin (lot of arms from Pakistan and indirectly from USA). In 1996 Taliban got control backed by Pakistan. Hamid Karzai came to power by Bonn Process but there is Inter group rivalry. There is high rate of illiteracy and poverty in this country.*

*Maldives were under British rule and it got Independent since 1965. It is peaceful with US \$ 2082 per capita GDP. In South Asia there are a lot of casualties by these weapons.*

*It is a huge burden on the governments to treat all those injured. Treating such victims takes away the vital funds from health departments needed for curing other diseases. It leaves behind a trail of disabled persons needing extra medical attention. There are personal costs of treatment and rehabilitation along with psychological and psychosocial costs. There are increasing attacks on health workers resulting in closure of health institutes. Due to this Vaccination and immunization coverage falls, life expectancy decreases and child mortality rate increases.*

*There are 1.33 billion populations in the south Asia with US \$ 430 per capita income and only US \$ 220 per capita in Nepal with a lot of drugs and illicit arms trade. This creates fear among the populations. This creates hatred among various population groups. It is a burden on the economy of democracies due to which development of a countries lag behind. Funds have to be diverted to pay compensation to victims and fight such groups with arms. It causes destruction of physical infrastructure, decrease of agriculture production and school enrollment... Foreign and domestic investment decreases resulting in loss of domestic revenue. 44% of world poor are in South Asia. 522 million people earn less than US \$ 1/day. SAARC was formed to take care of social aspects.*

*Mr. Arun Shourie had rightly said that we should act with the urgency of a man, where his hair are on fire. Some of the solutions coming to my mind are that there should be control over manufacturing and marketing with a procedure and documentation for export, transit and brokering. Stockpiling should be prevented and comprehensive tracing system should be there with detailed record keeping, willingness to inform others and due care & sense of responsibility while transferring weapons should be exercised. There should be no transfer to non state actors and unauthorized entities. There should be destruction of weapons where conflicts have ended so that arms are not passed on to terrorists somewhere else in the world by illicit trade. There should be prevention of conflicts and post confliction rehabilitations. We know the problem, we know what is to be done, and we have technology for this in our reach. We should exchange information; we should have international understanding, cooperation and legally binding's instruments. Small arms and light weapons need as much attention as weapons of mass destruction. These are not just the weapons, which need attention but also the ammunition as without ammunition these weapons are of no use. The question arises- who is going to do this? Who will bell the cat? Can we depend on our politicians? Is it not the duty of the police or the army to do this? If we do not want to solve the problem we should definitely raise questions like this! If we want to solve the problem all of us will have to work, work honestly and work with the zeal of man who does not have the word impossible in his dictionary. We will have to emphasize in the field where we are working and bring it to the knowledge of all our colleagues that what dangers these weapons are to our society and to our little world. We will have to change the opinion of the public about such important issues. Only the public will elect such honest and dedicated leaders who will think more about them rather than the arms manufacturers and arms dealers. In this way lot of money will be saved which can be utilized for the up-lifting of the society. Have the will power to resolve the issue, sacrificing monetary gains and we will have a much better world to live in.*

**Prof. R.K.Gorea**